

Rodriguez gives testimony on H.R. 2173 to Veterans Subcommittee on Health; bill would expand VA services to include community mental health centers

(Washington, D.C.) -Congressman Ciro D. Rodriguez (TX-23) testified yesterday before the House Veterans Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Health on behalf of his bill, H.R. 2173, which enhances the ability of the Veterans Administration to provide mental health services to veterans through community mental health centers. Below is Congressman Rodriguez's testimony before the committee:

"Chairman Michaud, Ranking Member Miller, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you in support for an issue near and dear to my heart. H.R. 2173, a bill I introduced with my friend and colleague Congresswoman Napolitano, provides for the increase in capacity for mental health services through contracts with qualified community mental health centers.

"Recent surveys show that one in eight returning Iraqi war veterans report symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The same studies also report high incidence of major depression and anxiety disorders among returning members of Army and Marine combat units. As a Member of this Committee, we have long identified mental health services as a major issue facing returning soldiers as well as at the Veterans Administration (VA).

"Experts note that the manifestation of clinical symptoms of PTSD and other mental health disorders often occurs over several years. With the increase of active duty, guardsmen and reservists returning from combat, the necessary capacity to provide mental health services is relatively unknown. It is difficult to know if our large number of returning veterans will need mental health services beyond what the VA is capable of providing.

"My bill, H.R. 2173, authorizes the VA to contract with community mental health centers to increase their capacity. In my opinion the need has outpaced the capacity for the VA to provide mental health services in outpatient clinics. Contracting out to community mental health centers is already been done successfully in some states and could serve as a model for VA-wide implementation.

"Mr. Chairman, in my previous career, I worked in the mental health field as a social worker. I am fully aware of the great service provided by community mental health centers. If there is any doubt of the quality of care they provide, I can tell you of the hundreds of families

whose lives have been changes by the treatments received during my professional career in the field. But don't take my word for it. Each year, community health centers give nearly 6 million children, adults, and families in communities across the country the chance to recover and lead productive lives. Our returning soldiers deserve the same opportunity.

“As I mentioned before, it is clear that our soldiers are returning with an increased need for mental health services, but after this long war, it is unclear what the VA's capacity to fulfill this need will be. It is my hope that H.R. 2173 can provide the VA with the tools to continue to provide top notch mental health services to veterans in their own communities.

“Mr. Chairman, I would like to again thank you and the Members of this subcommittee for the opportunity to speak on this bill. I urge the Members to support this important legislation. Thank you and I would gladly answer any questions you may have.”

Congressman Rodriguez serves on the House Veterans Affairs Committee.